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Queer troubles with sensibility: An interview with Esther Newton

Esther Newton (b. 1940) is an influential American anthropologist, whose pioneering work on drag queens and gay and lesbian communities has contributed to the emergence of gay and lesbian anthropology, and gradually also queer anthropology, as a recognized sub-field within socio-cultural anthropology. Newton undertook her graduate work at the University of Chicago under the tutelage of Professor David Schneider. Newton is currently Professor of Women's Studies and American Culture, Department of Women's Studies, University of Michigan.

Newton was interviewed at the 113th American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in Washington DC, on Friday 5th December 2014. Prior to the interview, co-editors Boyce, Engebretsen and Posocco along with Gonzalez-Polledo developed a list of themes and questions that guided the conversation that follows. We have aimed to maintain the sense of informal and jovial atmosphere that guided the interview, as it began over a lunch meal in the hotel lobby and continued in the quiet of Esther's hotel room after, with Elisabeth joining in on Skype from China, and Ellen Lewin – Esther's room-mate and also notable feminist and queer anthropologist – entering the room and contributing to the latter part of the discussion.

Esther Newton in discussion with co-authors Paul Boyce, Elisabeth Engebretsen, E.J. Gonzalez-Polledo, Ellen Lewin, Silvia Posocco

EN = Esther Newton **PB** = Paul Boyce **SP** = Silvia Posocco **EJG** = EJ Gonzalez-Polledo **EE** = Elisabeth Engebretsen **EL** = Ellen Lewin

ON THE LEGACY OF NEWTON'S EARLY WORK

PB: *Cherry Grove, Fire Island*¹ is being re-published by Duke University Press, and also *Mother Camp*² is widely read in gender and sexuality studies courses and as you noted is recently translated into Spanish as well, so it's taught widely in anthropology and history courses. We were wondering how you see the multiple lives of the books that you have published over time and how they've spoken to different generations of researchers.

EN: Well, I have learned that if your work is good and if it's in print long enough it will find an audience. Because when *Mother Camp* first came out it just sank, you know. It was reviewed by one person and one sociologist who said it was terrible. He was a closeted gay man and he didn't like the idea of a gay culture. The first publisher let it go out of print after two or three years, and then University of Chicago Press picked it up and it's been in print all this time. So over this period of time a lot of people have read it. It's been very influential and I guess it really is pretty much the beginning of queer anthropology. So, I'm very happy with that, I mean, any scholar would dream of that. Same thing with *Cherry Grove*. I mean, it went out of print. Then Duke picked it up and it's beautiful, I don't know if you've seen it. It's a beautiful cover and just a beautiful job and I'm hoping it too will find a bigger audience.

¹ Newton, Esther. 2014 (1993). *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

² Newton, Esther. 1972 (1979). *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

One thing I'm really proud about is that it was used by this independent scholar to make a case to the state of New York government to register the theatre in Cherry Grove as a historic site. The federal government has recognised the theatre as a historic site. It's only the third gay and lesbian site to be designated as that by the Feds, so I'm really proud of that, it's wonderful. My work, even my first work has always been, in part, in the service of LGBT people. All my work is written in a way to be accessible. I do not use all the postmodern language because I feel that's a language that's only accessible to scholars. I want it to be read by literate people and I'm very happy with that. In the long run (laughs) very long run, because I've just turned 74. I'm very proud? to have initiated a discourse that to me is so important.

PB: It's interesting that you say the long run, because we were wondering... could you have anticipated...?

EN: Never. Never. Never... I had no idea... but you know all young people are the same... you don't see where - even things that seem like small decisions - where they're gonna go. I've been fortunate and I'm fortunate that I'm still alive and that, you know, I still can do interviews like this. (Soft laughter)

SP: What's also very interesting is that you see it as a work that doesn't have, you know, this kind of postmodern jargon-driven, jargon-heavy prose but nevertheless it's been so crucial to some of the arguments and some forms of post-structuralist theories of gender. So if one reads the last chapter of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, after many sections, one gets to the crux of the argument in the last section of the chapter, and there is, *Mother Camp* referred to as really clearly animating the text. So it's at the heart of even the gender performativity philosophical set of theorizing.

EN: While that's true. I feel that my work and the work of some others, who tended to be more historians and sociologists, has not been adequately cited. I mean, with a lot of the people who were doing postmodern work it's Foucault, Foucault, Foucault and that's where it started, you know Foucault and Judith Butler, but people were doing conceptually sophisticated work, not only good fieldwork but conceptually sophisticated work, not in the same language. That has not been adequately recognised in my view.

PB: We were also re-reading *Cherry Grove* and thinking about the ideas of backstage or front stage ethnographic account? Which may or may not resonate? We felt that you discussed this in direct and indirect ways and we saw there an analogy with the ethnographic life-world or context as a stage, or as an arena, and also in some ways maybe as an analogy with the idea of stage that you explore in *Mother Camp*. Or perhaps a place where we cross the idea of a differentiation between life and ethnography. And we wondered if maybe you could speak to this idea of crossing - life, ethnography, being with people who become long term associates and passionate friends and so on.

EN: Well, I did talk about that at some length in an essay of mine, *My Best Informant's Dress*³ and I was really thinking about that there, and the pluses and minuses of being very personally involved - although I think every fieldworker, if they don't start out personally involved, they become personally involved - and I think that's probably necessary. I mean

³ Newton, Esther. 1993. "My best informant's dress: The erotic equation in fieldwork." *Cultural Anthropology* 8(1): 3-23.

you're being acculturated into this other worldview. Which is not as *other* as if I went to Guatemala or even more *other* would be if I went to Fiji or if I went to, you know, some non-western place. In some ways that makes it a little harder because if you're going to Fiji you're looking at everything, everything's new and you perhaps don't take certain things for granted. Whereas when you're working in your own culture or some variant of your own culture you take too many things for granted. You don't ask the right questions because you don't think to question certain things. I don't know if that's directly what you were getting at, maybe what you're getting at is more is the production of ethnography and the transition between participant observation and actually writing about it? Is that what you're talking about?

PB: Yes, that and the *experience* of ethnography – being an experiential thing that is often most successful when it's almost lets go of itself as being an ethnography.

EN: You're involved.

PB: Yeah, but somehow we want to come back and also frame the work or write the work and there's an interesting transition there.

EN: I think that's a necessary... you know, there was some work produced in the 1970s on the lesbian feminist community and the author tried an experiment that was very much driven by lesbian feminist ideology, of not having any narrative voice. It was called *The Mirror Dance*, by Susan Krieger. So no narrative voice and this person said this and this person said that. So there was an editorial action of putting those voices together but no narrative voice. And I think it was a very daring experiment but I found it unsatisfying. I really think that in the end it is your responsibility to produce an analysis and put things in a framework -you're telling a story- and to make that story intelligible and so maybe in a way that's what makes anthropology so unique. You're not just engaging with documents, you're engaging with people and an environment, but then you have to restructure it into this written account. And I think that's really important and I think that you as the narrator have to take responsibility for that. It's kind of analogous to privilege. If you have privilege - of which I had some in my life, as well as disadvantage - I think it's very important to take responsibility for that. To own up to it.

EJG: Yeah I completely see the resonance between that and ways that I've thought about for example the task of ethnography as one of negotiation. Because exactly what you're saying is right. You're actually living with people ... but you also have an agenda, you also have a certain set of conceptual tools that aren't necessarily those 'of the people'.

EN: No they're not (laughs)

EJG: And it's like a negotiation that sort of happens at different stages and I was wondering if you had some reflections of how that worked for you in different stages of your career.

EN: Well when I did the first work with the drag queens, I mean that was a different era. And you went out to the field and you came back and you wrote up your thing and you didn't even send them a copy, you know? It was part of your work that you had to do to get your PhD or write your book or whatever. I mean I actually did send a copy to my best informant but because of my political engagements I came to think ... to have to re-think that. But, I did not submit the manuscript to the people I had talked to, with one exception, a dear friend who also was a narrator, I call it in my book and I gave her a chapter to read, a draft, you

know? And she said “I’m very upset with this, you’re making it seem as if alcoholism is a big problem in *Cherry Grove* and I don’t want you to put that out to the straight people.” So I really had to think about that. I originally was going to write a whole chapter on alcoholism. I thought it was so important [as a] part of the history. I decided to take that into account. I still wrote about it, I still wrote what I thought about it, I still wrote how pervasive it was, but I didn’t spotlight it by writing a whole chapter about it. That’s the only time that I actually negotiated in that, you know, ‘here what do you think’ [way]. And when you read... I don’t know if you’ve read *Boots of Leather Slippers of Gold*,⁴ but *they* actually went through this laborious process of showing, you know, community meetings and this and... Maybe I just didn’t have the patience for that. But I wanted to write... I felt that I’d be responsible to this community, but I still wanted to write it how I saw it. So... I don’t know if that answers the question.

PB: It does, it does.

DEBATING QUEER SENSIBILITIES

PB: So it’s a theme of the special issue that we propose that anthropology is marked by a range of what we call ‘queer sensibilities’ to the analysis of subjectivities, forms of sociality and struggles with being in the world in a range of contexts. We’re wondering, how do anthropologies of queer sensibilities as they emerge in your work and the work that has flourished since, connect to the production of queer epistemologies? Is the question settling and making sense?

EN: I think so. I am not entirely comfortable with the term ‘queer’ even though I use it all the time. I use it because it’s easier than saying LGBT-Q-Y-G-J, you know. And to a degree it is all the same people, just with a different name. And I’m old enough to have been through this once before, where everybody was a ‘homosexual’ and then after gay liberation suddenly ‘homosexual’ was so passé, was so old... you know, “we’re not homosexuals any more, we’re gay”, you know it was all the same people. And I’m not entirely comfortable with the use of queer to denote any type of rebellion or departure from the norm, which I feel is how it’s used a lot. I don’t really see anthropology as having –as a whole, as a discipline- as having... I don’t know how useful it is to say that it’s a queer sensibility. Um, yeah, I’m very ambivalent about that. And maybe it’s just because I’m so yesterday, you know

PB: No, I think there’s also a contemporary ambivalence that we all share and experience in different ways

EN: I think anthropology has a perspective that is very different from mainstream so-called ‘common sense’ perspectives. I was on a panel this morning that was on gender based violence and particularly within marriage, and some of these women had been working with lawyers and people from NGOs and talking about gender based violence, sexual violence, and they said, “we were so surprised, we found that these lawyers...” and so on... “they didn’t share our common assumptions that we have - common assumptions as anthropologists- at all and we didn’t know how to make our point of view intelligible to them. And we were frustrated because we felt that we couldn’t affect policy”. So, I think that anthropologists... and this is anthropology as an intellectual framework, is my

⁴ Kennedy, Elizabeth L. and Madeline D. Davis. 1993. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*. New York: Routledge.

framework. As an institution I'm very unhappy with it, but as an intellectual framework... And I think as people trained as anthropologists- we do have a perspective that is so influenced by the conviction that our own culture -whatever it is- is not any more representative of 'human nature' than any other culture. I mean that's fundamental. But I wouldn't, I don't know why it's useful to call that 'queer'. Maybe you could explain it to me.

PB: Well, it might not be useful.

SP: Yeah it might not be useful, but just to say that one way of thinking about it would be not to assume what the object of analysis will be, so that one dislodges a certain link between what we might think of as a 'queer sensibility' and a set of subjects and populations that there is no adequate referent for. So, the way in which one would look for a 'queer subject' or a 'queer object' would not necessarily be one that clusters under a certain identity. But it might be to follow certain kinds of practices, or certain kinds of connections, which are other than the identitarian ones. So, it's a way of opening up the field, to be a little bit, how shall I say, more expansive in the way in which we might think, but might cluster under 'queer'. So it's not necessarily with subjects and their identities or specific communities or sub-cultures or collectives.

EN: Those are all things that are so important to me.

SP: That's what I'm trying to say, that's what we might be able to evoke with the idea of a sensibility.

EN: But there is a gay sensibility.

SP: Aha!

PB: Can you elaborate?

EN: Well there's a traditional gay and lesbian culture, you know and we are inheritors of that, and that's really, really important to me. For example a student that I liked a lot, had a dissertation last year or maybe the year before –and he's so queer- (laughter) and he did this thing on French literature, on novels of the 19th century and he was calling them queer because the male protagonists weren't conventionally masculine and the relationships, the heterosexual relationships broke up at the end. And I remember that at the end David Halperin –who's at the University of Michigan and was on this kid's committee, I guess not a kid but to me - and he said "I hope you realise you're a traitor". And I, I knew where he was coming from. It was like, you're betraying, by extending the word queer to these novels that are about a heterosexual situation, you're betraying your people. I mean it was sort of a joke but not completely and I didn't feel... I was just thrilled that he'd finished his dissertation and that he'd got a job, a tenure tracked job, despite being very gender alternative, but all those things are super important to me... identities, sensibilities that are tied to identities... When I was in graduate school, I read Susan Sontag's essay *Notes on Camp*. And it pissed me off to the max because she never really tied it to the gay community – just in a glancing way.

SP: It sounds like hetero-theft. (Laughter)

EN: I thought it was. It pissed me off my whole career that she did that. (Laughter)

And of course she was [for] all the big literary establishment [their] favourite queer/non queer, you know.

PB: Yeah.

EN: Whereas people who, like me or like Gayle Rubin or like Lillian Faderman, you know, women who've made real important intellectual - Judith Butler, she's pretty famous, but not always in the way she'd want to be (Laughter) you know - Anyway don't get me started...

PB: Given this, how do you think we go beyond attachments to erotic subject positions as anthropologists, or beyond queer subjectivities and how do you think the politics of these kinds of attachments changed over time? This is somewhat connected to what you were just articulating about actually being attached to sub-cultures and finding that a productive real thing versus an approach which is...

EN: Well I'll tell you how real it is. I, throughout my entire career – with the exception of my mentor, David Schneider- every honour, every speaking gig, every... everything has come from other queers... Everything. The American Anthropological Association has never honoured me in any way. The Anthropology department at Michigan didn't even give me a dry appointment, you know an unbudgeted; that's real. And this is how I came out, I was nineteen, eighteen-nineteen, and this is my base of support, and I feel very strongly about it. I really do and I see that it's changing, you know. For example the identity 'lesbian', which is a word I don't really like, but nevertheless in the 20th century is a very important word, and I was just talking to Evie Blackwood, last night and Ellen [Lewin] about how it's gone away that identity. But you know, if identities are historically constructed then they can go away as well as being created. I'm sad about it. I think that young women now are going to find that there are disadvantages to 'queer' that women will once again disappear under that rubric. So that's a change that's very visible to me, and saddening for me. But young women identify now as 'gender queer'. I don't know how it is outside the US but I think working class women still identify more as dykes or lesbians or something. But certainly college educated kids, not that many of them identify as lesbian. And there's advantages to the idea of queer, um but, to me I am a member of... I have an identity, this is it. I've put my life into it.

SP: Elisabeth, this was one of the questions you were going to ask, wasn't it? The question around the disappearance of 'lesbian'.

EE: Oh yeah! Well I was interested in a couple of your essays in the *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*⁵ essay collection, the ones that you wrote quite early in response to the particular social and political environment back then.

EN: Right.

EE: And there's one also, and sorry I don't have the actual word wrote, with me right now and it's a little late [in China] but there's one about misogyny in the academy ["Too queer

⁵ Newton, Esther. 2000. *Margaret Mead made me gay: Personal essays, public ideas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

for college: Notes on homophobia”]. And I was re-reading them now, recently, and I felt that even though they were written quite some time ago, there’s a lot of resonance still to many of the situations we’re facing now in the academy with the lack of jobs and lack of space for queer or LGBT academics. But also definitely [it’s] my personal sense of seeing less and less female gendered queer or lesbian identified academics working in the field on non-normative gendered sexuality certainly within anthropology but also anthropological work being done outside the discipline of anthropology. So I wondered, if my sense of that is true, if that is the case, and whether you see any differences and similarities between what you wrote in earlier on, with the situation today - the space for specifically female gendered academics to work anthropologically in the academy on non-normative gender and sexuality? And what that could be saying, more about the precarity of academia today, or as a whole?

EN: Well we were just talking about that over lunch, somewhat, for men and women both and trans people too. I just was at a workshop at the convention here about that and heard some stories that could’ve been my story. And I fear things haven’t changed that much. What I observe is that people - now this is a very concrete part of the answer - people who get PhDs in Anthropology and who want to work on non-normative sexuality and gender often do not get jobs in Anthropology departments, if they get jobs at all. They instead get - and I’m an example of that where my job now is in women’s studies at the University of Michigan, and that is a very important change - the women’s studies and women, gender and sexuality type departments that have made room, and I think most of them feel that they must have some few scholars who are working in this area. But in Anthropology I don’t feel it’s much different. I think a lot of men who were working on AIDS - that was kind of recognised as a field that maybe a department should have... but I don’t see much. I don’t keep up as much as I used to certainly but, I think that, as I said before that under the label ‘queer’ that women tend to disappear, just as they did under the idea of ‘homosexual’ or ‘gay’, and I think that historically lesbians have never been seen as important people, or as an important area of study.

EE: But is it also not about us as academics? That people who look like you and me and so forth (laughter EN) are not usually, sort of eligible for hiring committees for example, and also in certain day to day academic life, and also in western culture that nobody else thought that the lesbians or the women will study their own specific groups? You know straight people will not study lesbians unless it’s about a very particular public health issue or something to do with reproductive technologies for example that could unite ‘women’ as a bigger umbrella category. So it seems to me also that there would be very few people, a very small demography of people who would in the first place be interested in a study, but also the fact that people who are lesbians themselves or non-conforming females will have a hard time just being in academic departments.

EN: Well we had a job candidate the other day, for an appointment that’s joint between American Culture and Women’s Studies, and there were three candidates. I hadn’t met the other two and this one came and she was wearing a suit and tie. And I thought “hey, is she gonna get this job”? I mean, I don’t know the answer to that. I don’t know if she’s gonna get it and of course...no not at all, you can just unplug her oxygen machine there. She had worked with Jack Halberstam at USC and Jack always wears a suit and tie so... See, this is a whole separate problem, that the fem lesbians have a different issue than the butch lesbians do because the fem lesbians have to make themselves, if they want to, have to make themselves legible as lesbians because people wouldn’t take them as a lesbian, but the butch have to negotiate people’s discomfort, you know, or how do you present yourself,

what the hell do you wear? So I thought it was pretty amazing that this gal wore a suit and tie for a job talk but I don't know if that would have gone over at all in an anthropology department. Nobody said anything.

PB: Do you think there's something particular in respect of these issues to anthropology as aside from academia in general?

EN: I think some of the rest of academia is worse.

[That] is my impression. Like political science departments. Ah!! Even the idea of having a woman, having any kind of woman seems like a big deal. So I don't think Anthropology's worse, no. But I think that in terms of what is supposed to be our intellectual framework, it's worse. Yeah what are supposed to be our commitments ...

PB: To difference.

EN: Yeah to difference, exactly. Judged against that, it's really pretty shocking the conventionality, the degree of conventionality.

PB: in some ways we see quite a lot of new ethnographies emerging - Weiss and so on, ethnographies of what might be seen as queer scenes in the contemporary U.S. How do you see this partial institutionalisation on the one hand and its 'research objects' -very often analysing aspects of social life in the U.S. context. Could this be seen as a turn inwards? Is this dictated by challenges of proposing studies beyond the U.S. as say, the first PhD dissertation project? And do you think this orientation or focus, geopolitical focus has changed over time?

EN: Within Anthropology, I do think so. Because when I did my work, the idea of doing American Anthropology was almost unheard of. And it's still not very accepted. But, much has changed. First of all, the money has dried up. If you want to do foreign fieldwork, that's expensive. And you need to get money somehow to do that. And if you're not independently wealthy, it is simply impossible to go somewhere, like New Guinea or Guatemala and sustain yourself for six, nine months of the year, and this is one reason I believe why, you know anthropological work or historical work which are the two kinds of work I've done the most... they're very, very time intensive. And as the money has dried up more and more, it makes it harder and harder to go, to do any kind of fieldwork. But the foreign fieldwork's more expensive. So that's part of the reason in my view for the ascendancy of media studies, English and so on because you can sit in your little room and read three or four novels and make a dissertation out of it. You can't do that in Anthropology. You have to get 'out there' for the most part, you have to meet people you have to think about, you have to immerse yourself, and this all takes time, takes money... And that's harder and harder to come by, and all the more so for queer type subjects, which are not seen by granting agencies as important. So I think that is one reason for more American kinds of subjects because it's more doable financially maybe you can... for example, my friend Ellen that I'm rooming with, Ellen Lewin, she has a graduate student who just did a year and a half I think it is of fieldwork with their drag queen and drag butch or drag king contests... they're all over the Midwest and the South... And they mimic the Miss America contest. They're beauty pageants, you know... she did it all on her own money. You know sleeping in her van or

whatever, you know, just on a shoestring. Because who was gonna fund this? Who was gonna think this was important? But she was able to do it here. Whereas doing something comparable in a foreign country would've been a much more complicated and costly project. So I think that's one reason. And I think another reason is because of the work that some of us have done, sort of blazing that path, and then other people look at it and they say "Oh, I could do that". Which is great.

SP: Do you think there is perhaps another element to this, if we call it a kind of inward trend, right? Inward looking trend. Is there a kind of geopolitical mapping of this? So for example do larger geopolitical questions like the Cold War, the War on Terror play into this in any way? Or not?

EN: Maybe. That's hard for me to say. The war on terror I think has been so negative in so many ways, um, but not being in an Anthropology department I'm maybe not the best informed about how that's played out.

SP: I mean the question was, you know, about how Queer Anthropology itself is shaped by these larger processes and so that we might [unintelligible] want to think about it in relation to say, the Cold War, Cold War geopolitics, which I can map in relation to my field site very clearly, or in relation to other more recent geopolitical questions whether there was a kind of geopolitical context against which Queer Anthropology articulates itself, you know, its preoccupations and objects...as a larger thing.

EN: I think that's probably very true. Because before this [present job] I taught only undergraduates. I knew queer anthropologists through networks, you know, and I worked with some graduate students that way, but I wasn't, for that whole 35 years I wasn't in a graduate Anthropology department that was training graduate students, so... And I'm not now. I mean I do, I've worked with some that were in Anthropology and came over and worked with me because they wanted to do queer work at Michigan.

PB: I suppose we were wondering whether there is a refocusing - whether it's purely underlined by materialities or an epistemological shift to questioning work focused on 'others;' to bring the focus of Anthropology 'back home' as it were.

EN: Well certainly there is that, there's the whole reflexive turn in Anthropology and a questioning, you know, and anti-colonialist; there've been these big important questions that have influenced Anthropology as a whole but I still see here at the meetings, you know, Guatemalanists and Oceanistss. think working here is more important to queers than it is to straight people. Because how excited is the straight Anthropologist going to get, you know, in some suburb here [in the US] and studying the natives? (Laughter) I mean that has been done, and it's been done very well in fact, but it's not immediately obvious as a, as you know... And it's not a good career move.

COMPANION SPECIES AND THE ACADEMIC BUBBLE

PB: We're coming to the end, we have a slightly off the wall question, which a few of us are committed to, about our companion species, dogs.

EN: Dogs!

(Laughter)

PB: so... both Elisabeth and I are dog owners.

SP: I'm the odd one out, I have a cat...

PB: So we're just wondering about your reflections on the work that's emerging on companion species and how we live with animals.

EN: I'm not working on it but a lot of people have urged me to do it. My partner was an editor of a book that just came out last year called Animal Acts. And it's performances that in some way or another involve animals. So she's met a lot of these people, I haven't heard of an Anthropologist, but people in other fields who were working on animals, and she's expressed frustration to me that it's kind of "The Animal" as an abstraction. As opposed to people who actually work with animals.

And that's somewhat similar to how 'The Body' was this site of kinds of, you know... and like, whose body? What are we talking about here? She's very involved in um... I think it's great. I think it's very, you know whether it's animals that we eat or...

I think it's... I don't know the work very well because I haven't seen much in Anthropology, although maybe it's... I saw a book at the book exhibit... This guy had written, I forget what it was called but... I looked at the first page and it was like, 'The Animal' and that... a huge abstraction that... doesn't really... interest me... I'm primarily interested in dogs.

PB: Just for the sake of the record... (laughter) and my personal interest... What kind of dogs do you have...currently in your life?

EN: My partner and I currently have two miniature poodles and a little terrier and she has a standard poodle puppy and a little terrier.

EL: She has a standard poodle puppy?

EN: I told you that!

EL: No!

EN: Yes, she a standard poodle puppy.

EL: What colour?

EN: Black.

EL: Uhuh. How old?

EN: Errr... six months almost.

EL: Girl?

EN: Boy. And this is a huge, huge...

EL: I love miniature poodles...

EN: Because of me...

EL: I got into poodles because of you.

(Laughter)

EL: And first I had standard poodles but now we've moved to miniature poodles cause they're easier to move around...

EN: Right, well we're old.

EL: Because we're old so when I had to carry around my 55 pound poodle up the stairs, because she was really sick it was like, really, do I want to do this, I don't think so.

EN: Right.

EL: So now they weigh 15 pounds of 14 pounds or something like that.

EN: Right. I've had six standard poodles; this is the seventh that we have now. And I downsized to miniatures because I want to be able to pick them up and... I don't want to be knocked over...

EL: And they're so cute.

EN: And I do a sport called Agility and I'm very, very committed and dedicated to this sport, and one of the things I like about it—I like many things about it- but one of the things I like about it is... I go all over the state of Michigan and I meet people who voted for Reagan, I meet people... (laughter) you know, or Bush... I meet people who... one time, this woman said to me... "Someone said you teach women's studies. What is that? Is that where a bunch of women get together and study?" (Laughter) I mean, you know, total... I don't want and I've never wanted to be in an academic bubble I've always wanted to be able to get out, and meet other people I didn't agree with... and so that's one of the things that I like, but I also like that's its keeping me active, mentally active and I just love dogs. I love them, I want them around me... I like everything about them...

QUEER ANTHROPOLOGY, ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND THE BDS MOVEMENT

SP: Finally, one of the issues that's been debated at this particular AAA meeting of the... is the question of the boycott. So I must take the opportunity to ask you how you think that fits into debates around Queer Anthropology and whether you have a comment on that.⁶

⁶ This conversation took place on Friday 5th December 2015, at the 113th American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in Washington DC. On this same day, anthropologists gathered at the annual conference were due to debate and vote on the 'Resolution: Opposition to a Boycott of Israel' proposed by some members. The resolution sought the Association's support for 'immediate resumption of peace talks involving all parties, and not the negativity of a boycott' (see resolution statement, <http://www.aaanet.org/about/Governance/upload/113th-AAA-Annual-Business-Meeting-Agenda-online.pdf>), thus opposing the activities of those

EN: Well I know some queer Israelis. And they're devastated by what's going on. They, you know, were active in peace movements and... but other than that I don't see it as a queer issue. I mean there's this whole complicated issue about so-called pinkwashing...

EN: You know that Israel is trying to, you know, present itself as modern and forward thinking by being nicer to that gay people that are there...

EL: Sort of like the way the EU has these standards that you can't get in the EU if you discriminate against gay people, there's a whole thing, like Turkey, there's been a whole issue...

EL: What do they have to demonstrate? That they're modern?

EN: So there's that but on the whole I don't think it's a queer... I mean this goes back to what I said before that I don't see what is gained by saying that this or that issue that's no way attached to actual people... I don't see the utility of that... I mean, I think, Ellen who is Jewish and I who am half Jewish, feel personally involved in this issue because of that.

EL: Although I feel that it gets attributed. You know, we have to deal with this whole thing with people thinking, that if you're Jewish first of all they assume you're a Zionist, which, you know, I'm not and I get very resentful about that... And, you know, that there's tremendous diversity and especially I think that now in the U.S. a lot of American Jews who used to be more unreflectively Zionist are changing their positions because of what's been happening lately... it's so horrifying.

EN: Well me, I'm an example of that.

EL: Were you more Zionist before?

EN: I've always been Zionist in the sense that, as I've told you - my father being Jewish, the Holocaust was always very present in my upbringing and so I always felt, yes, Jews need a place where they can go and where they can be settled, I've always felt that...

EL: It's called New York. (Laughter) Excuse me, you know, where has been the greatest place for Jews in the world is America since Spain in the middle ages. Spain in the middle ages was really the best, but that's over...

EN: Right.

anthropologists actively engaged in supporting the Boycott, Divest and Sanctions movement. Arguments for and against the resolution were discussed widely among members in the run up to the meeting, in many panels and roundtables during the conference and on the day of the vote at the AAA Annual Business Meeting (see, for example, <http://www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/upload/IsraelPalestineDocument2014.pdf>). The resolution was rejected, as only 52 members supported it, whilst the overwhelming majority of those present at the vote opposed it (for details of the voting process and results, see <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/12/08/anthropologists-reject-resolution-opposing-academic-boycott-israel>).

EL: And now it's America, I'm sorry.

EN: Ok, but... Ellen... She's very dominant.

EL: I'm sorry, you're not interviewing me so I'm just...

EJG, PB and SP: (laughter) We are now... (Laughter)

SP: If you don't mind...

EL: I'm just putting in my two cents... ok but that's not your position...

EN: My position, you know, when people would say, you know, Israel's not fair to the Palestinians, you know and I've never been there, but I thought, yeah that's right, they're not being fair to the Palestinians and then there started to be this whole settler thing and I was like, oh that's disgusting and wrong. But somewhere I always felt that I'm on Israel's side, just because of this history, and over the summer that's really started to change. Some guy wrote an article, it was in The Guardian, maybe The Guardian and Holly showed me and the guy said, liberal Judaism is dead, that just, that was just recently

EL: That was just recently yeah.

EN: That was just recent and you know I read that article and I thought, that's right, it's just not moving toward a peace process, it's not moving toward a two state solution. I believe that they're moving toward a "Let's ethnic cleanse the Palestinians [position]"

EL: Apartheid...

EN: And that is unacceptable to me.

EL: But you know, you've come to that more recently, I felt like that the whole time.

EL: I've never been a Zionist, my father was a refugee from the Nazis, and my father refused to set foot in Israel because he believed that a chauvinist single ethnicity state was wrong.

And he was very principled about this and he wouldn't... um, he wouldn't have anything to do with it and he, um, and he'd always say to me well don't let anybody tell you you're not as good as other people because you're a Jew but also, you're not better.

EL: Hello. You are not better. And I went to Israel once, I was there once, twenty four years ago, and um, it was in many ways a life altering experience. I found it unbearable to be there. I felt like I was being locked up in a cell with a bunch of my craziest relatives, which was partly what was happening, but... (laughter)... but also these other people and you know, this an assumption that if you're a Jew you should want to go there... and I personally believe, I'm an Eastern European, my family's from Russia, I personally believe that we were never in the Middle East, I think that we were derived from people from the Caucasus, there's a whole thing about that with mass conversions in the middle ages of these tribal people in the Caucasus to Judaism and I think that's where I come from I don't believe we were ever there and we don't have a right to march in and claim it. Now on the other hand Jews went there for very good reasons, at the end of the war and I'm sympathetic to that

'cause, you know I'm descended from... you know and I grew up also with the Holocaust, you know my father kept a careful count we lost 38 members of our family, and my father had a little record of what happened to everybody...

And some people had to go there, partly because the United States refused to let them in..

EN: It's true.

EL: And other places, and they built something there so it's sort of like are we gonna say, you know in the U.S., there was the stuff that was done to the American Indians, all their land was taken... I was just at the museum of the American... there's a national Museum of the American Indian here in Washington, which is pretty interesting, and they had this whole exhibit, you know, the whole state of New Jersey belonged to the Lenape Indians. But like, are we gonna give them back New Jersey now? It's kind of impossible. Plus you know the crime families wouldn't let them... won't let them have it, but you know what I mean, you can't undo what's happened. It's terrible, these people were slaughtered and there were millions of them and they get... what happened to the Indians after, a few years after North Americans came?

EN: Oh it was devastating.

EL: There used to be millions and millions of them and it went down to half a million, they all died of diseases and then they were murdered, but you can't,... it's all terrible but you can't take it back, so you have to figure out where to go from there.

SP: Well, one can make it an issue for the present. So that to think that the question of justice and stolen land is a matter not about history – in the sense of being about the past – but about the present...

EN: But what are you going to do about it?

EL: What are you going to do about, so... the question also with Israel they've built, they've done amazing things there, you go there and there's this beautiful cultural

EL: It's very interesting. And some of it is very beautiful I mean I can't say I saw everything but I saw a bunch of things and...um... but its also this horrible racist state with basically apartheid... And it's not, you know, without some cracks in the system so, like I met this guy the other night, he's an Arab-Israeli graduate student in Anthropology at Tel Aviv University, he's from Haifa which is a very ethnically mixed city, it's the most ethnically mixed place, and he was against the boycott. And he's getting a PhD at an Israeli institution. I mean it's not true that they've been totally kept out. You know, it's a very mixed story and there are all these human stories in the middle... And I basically think the two state solution is not even what I would've preferred. I would've preferred a one state solution but a multi-ethnic state. And that was maybe possible in 1947, I mean that's gone away...

PB: There's an erasure of a shared history isn't there... and a shared identity?

EL: There is a shared history, but I personally don't think my history goes back, you know, to Palestine. I think my history goes back to Russia. And the Caucuses and when I think about a place, you know my family felt that they'd been torn out of Russia. That was the place that

they... you know and we spoke Russian, or I tried to speak but other people in my family spoke Russian, you know, I didn't want to learn Hebrew that's not my language. Maybe Yiddish, but not Hebrew. But in any case we all have different feelings so you're partly Jewish, I'm Jewish, everybody has a different feeling about this.

EN: But Ellen persuaded me to oppose the boycott because... Well I know some Jewish academics and you know I mean the academics are the most progressive part of the society, so, I don't... you know it's against academic freedom and I'm very mixed I have very mixed feelings about it. I have to say, I mean. And I have just recently, you know gone through a big painful change about my feelings about Israel being so negative now... But, um I'm still going to vote against the boycott.

SP: Right...

EL: You know it's going to punish the most progressive people... not all of progressive some of the academics... it's just like here, some of us are very progressive, and some are not. And so, when they talk about they want to boycott Israel, because people are complicit with the government, well what about the United States? Look at the stuff that we do. Want to boycott a really harmful government? Boycott the United States but nobody wants to do that because they're all American and it would be really inconvenient.

EN: Yes that's true.

EN: It is very complicated. I mean yet we do support certain policies even though the situations might be very complicated. But that's a policy that I'm not going to support at this point.

END